



Report on MWPAAC customer agency meetings

The Metropolitan Water Pollution Abatement Advisory Committee, or MWPAAC, was established to advise the King County Executive and the County Council on issues related to sewer service within the county's regional wastewater treatment service area.

Over the past few years, there has been an increasing sense that the working relationship between MWPAAC and county elected officials and staff has weakened. Upon assuming the role of Wastewater Treatment Division Director in 2007, Christie True spent four months meeting individually with 33 component agencies to better understand the specific issues affecting their agencies and customers, and to hear about their experience as MWPAAC members working with King County.

The meetings presented an opportunity for customer agencies to give King County a candid assessment of MWPAAC's effectiveness, what they expect from both MWPAAC and King County, and what steps might be taken to strengthen the working relationship moving forward.

Most importantly, the meetings were a means to get difficult issues out in the open – the key to meaningful discussions around these issues is first understanding what they are.

Major Findings

At the conclusion of the meetings and after reviewing all the meeting notes, the director came up with these three major findings:

- **King County's decision-making processes aren't well-understood or well-communicated.** In general, members don't appear to have a solid understanding of the role of MWPAAC, the RWQC, the King County Executive and the County Council in making decisions, or how to develop or take advantage of processes that could be used to influence decision-making.
- **MWPAAC, in its current state, is not an effective advisory body.** MWPAAC members view the organization as not effectively influencing all decisions related to their interests. The county is perceived as either unwilling to listen, or unable to get the advice it needs from component agencies.
- **The county's service levels are highly rated, but there are concerns about rising costs of these services.**

The following paragraphs summarize the individual comments members expressed during the meetings.

On MWPAAC/King County relations

MWPAAC members widely shared the opinion that the county often appears to ignore their comments and concerns on issues such as contracts, reclaimed water and Culver funding. Members expressed concerns about the reclaimed water feasibility study, and many seemed unclear about the study's purpose and the range of issues that it will focus on. Several people gave low marks to the process around reclaimed water to date.

Several members mentioned feeling a disconnect with their representatives on the Regional Water Quality Committee, or RWQC, and many had concerns about RWQC members who don't operate sewer districts in King County's service area and are not customers of King County. There were differing opinions about the effectiveness of RWQC in initiating effective dialog and making timely decisions.

One of the biggest points of contention among members was the recent bond security ordinance adopted by the King County Council last spring, which some agencies felt was poorly communicated to them. Some perceived the ordinance as negating the need for contracts and felt it diminished the role of the component agencies. Others understood the timing and the need for such an ordinance though they were reluctant to voice support in front of other MWPAAC members.

Members generally agreed that the county needs to be more upfront about what is going on in the utility and to be more open about sharing information on upcoming issues.

Above all, MWPAAC members sought greater communication – when the county disagrees with MWPAAC, be clear about the reasons and respond to committee questions. Repeatedly, component agencies asked for more involvement in decision-making processes and for more of a partnership arrangement.

With regard to what is working, members cited the I/I and CSI programs as examples of processes that went well and incorporated MWPAAC member comments and suggestions.

MWPAAC Organization and meetings

Many members appreciate the meetings and opportunities to share information, though there were criticisms of the organizational meetings and questions about their overall effectiveness.

A wide majority cited concerns about what they described as the “overwhelming negativity” of the members-only meetings. Some feel meetings are dominated by people to forward their own agenda. Some questioned the accuracy of information presented at the members-only meeting. Others felt the monthly MWPAAC meetings accomplished little, that issues were “gummed to death”. Some people also mentioned that the negativity at these meetings made them not want to attend, and that they wished agencies would take up individual issues with the county directly rather than consuming the entire committee's time.

Several people wondered if the lunch meetings, while collegial, were a productive use of time. Small cities and districts see their limited resources as a barrier to participating more fully in MWPAAC meetings.

People also spoke about MWPAAC's structure and advisory role. Subcommittee work was highly regarded, and members also felt that the Finance Committee consistently presents good, useful information. Some feel MWPAAC needs to understand its advisory role more clearly, and be better prepared to respond to questions the county might ask. Many had opinions about committee and subcommittee meeting frequency – some wanted more, some wanted fewer.

Again, many people cited I/I as an example of MWPAAC's strengths as an advisory body and being effective at working with the county to shape policy.

Members' suggestions for improvement included more evening meetings, different meeting locations, better communication from the subcommittees to the larger group, and orientation for new members to help them better understand the organization and its functions.

Relations and differences between customer agencies

This was another area in which there were widely differing viewpoints between customer agencies.

The contract subcommittee process hasn't been clear to all agencies participating, and some of the smaller cities reported feeling left out. Among the many agencies that wanted to support contract negotiations, there wasn't a consistent position on all contract issues, such as reclaimed water, Culver funding, and capacity charge methodology. A common sentiment is that Seattle isn't interested in suburban growth issues, and forgets that suburban areas help pay for CSO control.

On mitigation, some thought the county does too much, others said not enough. Many people expressed concerns about disputes between members, especially committee and subcommittee chairs.

Some city staff and elected officials who attend MWPAAC meetings reported that sewer system issues weren't always the highest priority for city elected officials. And some reported observing differences of opinion between an agency's elected officials and the agency staff who attend MWPAAC meetings.

Service levels and cost

All agencies consistently agreed that sewer service was "good" to "excellent", and people felt the county did a good job in addressing stakeholder issues and concerns on specific construction projects in their community.

But many had concerns about costs and rates. Brightwater came up repeatedly, people wanted to understand more about cost drivers in the county's capital program.

Few agencies had written or verbal testimony to share about customer sewer rate concerns, though some had anecdotal comments about conversations in the grocery store, etc. Some customer agencies reported that the county's wholesale rate increases put pressure on their agencies to hold rates steady even though they need rate revenue for their own operating and

asset management budget needs. They also report that several other utility rates are also increasing, dramatically affecting some component agency communities.

While some agencies were concerned, they put sewer rates at a lower priority compared to the other challenges being faced by their community.

Communication and cost

Several commented that communication with ratepayers about what their sewer rates are used for should be a priority. Many agencies offered suggestions about how the county could broaden communication, including public information pieces, brochures, mailings, informational articles in city and district newsletters, etc.

Members also requested a MWPAAC Web page with information such as meeting agendas and schedules, presentations, reference materials (like bylaws), and county staff contact information.

Other issues

The two major issues of concern for MWPAAC members are related to reclaimed water and sewer contracts, though component agencies have differing opinions about how the county should proceed on these issues since their individual interests and priorities are also varied.

For reclaimed water, some agencies are extremely supportive of it while others are not. Some members expressed frustration at the reclaimed water technical committee's lack of progress and were concerned about the program's future. Others had concerns about potential program costs as well as the county's policy direction on reclaimed water. Members requested more technical study as well as a public information campaign about reclaimed water safety.

Likewise, members had a variety of opinions and ideas on contracts. Members perceive distrust between MWPAAC and the county. Some expressed concerns about potential "hidden agendas" and the ability to continue good faith discussions. Others agencies just want to sign and move on. Several agencies suggested a facilitated process around continued contract discussions, and to get new people involved in the discussion process.

Director's recommendations

After receiving and considering these comments, the Wastewater Treatment Division Director came up with seven recommendations:

1. Develop a real charter for MWPAAC

State law and MWPAAC by-laws don't really establish what the committee is supposed to do. A charter would need to include developing annual work programs for both the subcommittees and the whole committees. The structure should allow adequate time for the committees to weigh in on county programs and address inter-committee communications. The county and MWPAAC should work together on this program so that it coincides with what is happening in the wastewater program.

2. Restructure MWPAAC meetings

- Restage the meeting so it doesn't have the appearance of a luncheon.

- Hold a meeting (food can still be provided) that includes a networking time.
 - Members only at the table, observers in a gallery
 - Hire a professional, independent facilitator to establish order in the meetings.
 - Establish ground rules to promote constructive discussions and ensure that legitimately differing perspectives are heard.
 - Eliminate the members-only meeting. If members want to caucus without the county, they can schedule, staff, and locate it within member-hosted venues
 - In the meantime, follow bylaws.
- 3. Establish clear processes for making recommendations to the Executive, Council and RWQC**
Get a dialog going between MWPAAC and RWQC members; report what happens at RWQC and the County Council to committee members.
 - 4. Create a caucus of MWPAAC members to meet with and inform RWQC members that represent them**
Work out a plan that is coordinated with RWQC and use the authority in the committee to advance policy discussions.
 - 5. King County and MWPAAC work together to create a new member orientation**
 - 6. Develop public information and communications about rates, services and capacity charges.**
We have already begun working on this.
 - 7. Develop a reclaimed water comp plan**
The program needs more focus and clarity on where it's going. The policies are conflicting and there are many questions that still need answers. A deliberative process will enable all of our customers and interested parties to have a say in the decision-making process. I have recommended this to the Executive – if he agrees, we will move forward quickly. I also recommend that we form a MWPAAC Reclaimed Water Subcommittee and/or have members participate in other stakeholder committees that will need to be formed.

More information

Visit the Wastewater Treatment Division's MWPAAC Web site, a portal to information for our component agency customers, at <http://dnr.metrokc.gov/wtd/mwpaac/home.htm>

Or contact Bob Hirsch, Government Relations Administrator, at 206-684-1266 or 711 TTY Relay, or e-mail bob.hirsch@kingcounty.gov

Alternative Formats Available by Calling 206-684-1280
or 711 TTY Relay